

Forgetfulness: It's Not Always What You Think

Excerpt from a publication of the National Institute on Aging

Many older people worry about becoming more forgetful. They think forgetfulness is the first sign of Alzheimer's disease. In the past, memory loss and confusion were considered a normal part of aging. However, scientists now know that most people remain both alert and able as they age, although it may take them longer to remember things.

A lot of people experience memory lapses. Some memory problems are serious, and others are not. People who have serious changes in their memory, personality, and behavior may suffer from a form of brain disease called dementia. Dementia seriously affects a person's ability to carry out daily activities. Alzheimer's disease is one of many types of dementia.

Sometimes older people have emotional problems that can be mistaken for dementia. Feeling sad, lonely, worried, or bored may be more common for older people coping with retirement or the death of a loved one. Adapting to these changes leaves some people feeling confused or forgetful. Emotional problems can be eased by supportive friends and family, or by professional help from a doctor or counselor.

People who are worried about memory problems should see their doctor. If the doctor believes that the problem is serious, then a thorough evaluation may be recommended.

Even if the doctor diagnoses dementia, much can be done to treat the patient and help the family cope. The doctor can treat the patient's physical and behavioral problems and answer questions that the person or family may have. In addition, there are medications that can be prescribed to possibly delay the worsening of some of the disease's symptoms.

Scientists are working to develop new drugs that someday may slow, prevent, or reverse the damage caused by dementia. In the meantime, people who have no dementia symptoms can try to keep their memory sharp. Some ideas include developing interests or hobbies and staying involved in activities that stimulate both the mind and body. Giving careful attention to physical fitness and exercise also may go a long way toward keeping a healthy state of mind.

Many people find it useful to plan tasks; make "things-to-do" lists; and use notes, calendars, and other memory aids. They also may remember things better by mentally connecting them to other meaningful things, such as a familiar name, song, or lines from a poem.

Stress, anxiety, or depression can make a person more forgetful. Forgetfulness caused by these emotions usually is temporary and goes away when the feelings fade. However, if these feelings last for a long period of time, getting help from a professional is important. Treatment may include counseling or medication, or a combination of both.

Some physical and mental changes occur with age in healthy people. However, much pain and suffering can be avoided if older people, their families, and their doctors recognize dementia as a disease, *not* part of normal aging.

Families often need information about community resources such as home care, adult day care, respite programs, and nursing homes. For help in finding the appropriate resource in your area, call the Montgomery County Senior InfoLine at 240-777-3000.